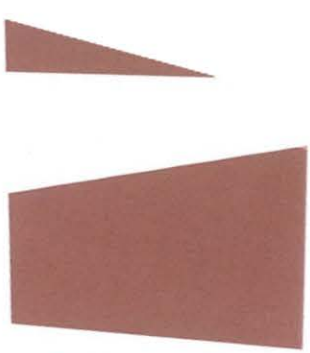




"A deeply moving
portrait of youth."
BRANDON HOBSON



FRANCISCO
DELGADO



ADOLESCENCE,
SECONDHAND



**ADOLESCENCE,
SECONDHAND**

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**ADOLESCENCE,
SECONDHAND**

FRANCISCO DELGADO

Introduced by
CRAIG PEREZ SANTOS

INTRODUCTION

CRAIG PEREZ SANTOS

+ + +

Adolescence, Secondhand is a poignant collection of inter-connected short stories about coming-of-age in America as a diasporic, mixed-race, and poor brown boy. The main character, Chris, guides us through his childhood and young adulthood as he learns to navigate the turbulent waters of family, friendship, love, race, class, and gender.

At various moments, Chris struggles to understand and express his complex genealogy. He is part Japanese, part Seneca Indian, and part native Chamorro from the Pacific Island of Guam. Questions of cultural identity and national belonging arise from within himself and from others. These questions are never fully answered; instead, Chris continually wrestles with his multicultural experience.

Violence and masculinity are also major themes. In “Wrestlemania VIII,” Chris watches a famous bout, which becomes symbolic of his parents fighting about his father’s infidelity. Chris notes: “I don’t even remember the emptiness my dad leaves in the room, enamored as I was by all the pomp and circumstance resounding triumphant that night at Wrestlemania.” In another story, “As Kids in Jefferson Park,” Chris witnesses two older kids arguing, which escalates when one of them flashes a gun. These domestic

and public acts of violence become rites of passage for the kids of color in this neighborhood to the point where “no amount of writing can ever un-write that.”

Another powerful theme of this work is family. In “Spam,” Chris’s older sister, Andrea, cooks Spam for the family while the mom attends nursing school and the father remains absent. Dinner is one of the few times they are all together. Chris poetically states: “This is how we say grace: not to God but to each other.” The family ties tighten in “Mrs. Wolburton,” when the family is displaced by a fire at their rental unit. One of the best stories, “Boxed Wine That Never Empties,” introduces us to Chris’ Seneca grandmother as they reminisce about his Chamorro grandfather, a romantic counterpart to the parent’s marriage. As that story comes to a close, Chris realizes that “we tell our stories to keep him close.”

Throughout, Francisco Delgado renders the characters with nuance and care, paints the settings with striking descriptions, and voices the dialogue and internal monologues with convincing inflections. There is drama in these stories, but the tone is never melodramatic. There are conflicts, but the narratives are more focused on capturing the “gaps and thresholds” of human tension. While the stories delve into the depths of memory and experiences, they remain grounded in everyday life and popular culture (references to Kurt Cobain, MTV’s *Real World*, and Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson are refreshing). Delgado is a deft storyteller who values sensitivity, humor, and grace. This chapbook is a fresh and welcome addition to the traditions of Pacific Islander, Native American, and Asian American literature.

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For Roseanne and Riordan

"Time is never time at all.

You can never ever leave, without leaving a piece of youth."

— Smashing Pumpkins, *Tonight, Tonight*

FAMILY PORTRAIT (1993)

Our home is built from gathered rain and last night's leftovers.

Our cars, imaginary, are grander than yours.

My sister once stole a winning lotto ticket, but our Catholic guilt made us tear it up. Teary-eyed, we asked God why he would give us such a blessing, knowing we were cursed?

Dad is a reincarnated samurai. He is tougher than yours and is willing to prove it.

Unemployed, he steals our bones while we sleep, fashioning a sword, he says, for no reason at all.

Mom is a reincarnated saint – twice up for proper sainthood, but she can't manage that third miracle.

I try to be it – so does my sister, but we’re too busy making up lies about stealing winning lotto tickets to do any good. We always finish our dinner and go to bed on time, though. Even the smallest of miracles count for something.

We are limited only by our imagination, mom says.

And what we can do with less, says dad.

They make us promise that we’ll grow up and buy houses of concrete and brick. Until then, we dance so the rain will never end.

WRESTLEMANIA VIII

The fifth match of the night pits the “The Macho Man” Randy Savage against “The Nature Boy” Ric Flair. Flair’s championship title is on the line, but more importantly than that is Savage’s wife’s honor, which Flair has threatened to ruin by showing nude photos of her.

My parents leave the room right before the match begins – I think to make dinner or pay bills or something.

“Macho Man” sprints down the entranceway, eager for the bell to ring. My sister, Evie, sits on the floor with me. She is not sure who “Macho Man” is, but she follows my lead in cheering him.

It is the classic tale of professional wrestling: good guy versus bad guy. Even if you don’t know the story of this match, you can tell who is who: Macho Man, like all good guys, is wearing bright, neon

colors, and Flair, like all bad guys, cheats every chance he gets.

He enlists his associate, Mr. Perfect, to hit Macho Man with a metal chair when the referee looks away. And most importantly, Mr. Perfect disrupts the count when Macho Man soars halfway across the ring and hits his patented elbow drop.

Just when it seems that Macho Man will fail, despite his good intentions, his wife Miss Elizabeth strides to ringside. She slams her palms on the canvas, rousing her husband to his feet, and we follow her lead, banging our hands on living room floors and coffee tables around the world. Because of us, Macho Man musters the strength to reverse Flair's momentum and scoops him up into a pin.

It is the happiest ending professional wrestling can give us: a wife whose honor is restored, a husband relieved of the rage that's blinded him for so long. What I keep trying to remember are the sound of my dad's footsteps as he walks out. Or the sound of his and my mom's hushed voices as they fight about the 'other woman.' I don't even remember the emptiness my dad leaves in the room, enamored as I was by all the pomp and circumstance resounding triumphant that night at Wrestlemania.

Where husbands defended their wives.

Where romance wasn't just something my mom read about in those books from Wal-Mart.

It was a feeling that I thought would last forever.

AS KIDS IN JEFFERSON PARK

It's a Tuesday. That's the first thing I remember. We're at Jefferson Park playing Hide-n'-Go-Seek. There's my sister, Evie, hiding in the crawling tube on the playground, and my best friend, Derrick, by the swings, still undecided where he should hide. There are other kids with us, but I've forgotten their names and can't picture them without instead seeing the 'friends' of titular characters from our favorite TV shows and movies.

We're about to start a new game when the teenagers on the basketball court form a semi-circle as two of them get ready to fight. The two are Felix Johnson and Mitch Scanlon, who are hands-down the toughest kids we know. They're fighting because Mitch called Felix the n-word, hard r.

At some point, Felix lifts his shirt and shows the gun. Because what I've always really wanted to do is make this into a work of fiction, I

can say he flashed anything: a cop's badge or an Austin 3:16 tattoo or even his genitals. But I'll stick to the original image of him flaunting a gun.

Because it's true. When the rest of us see it, we freeze wherever we are. Felix is the only one moving, maybe in the entire world.

+ + +

On the surface, this is about a fight I saw when I was eleven years old. Almost twelve, almost a teenager.

But I think it's really about a kid, me, demanding not to be treated like a kid, anymore. When we moved here, mom said we had to stay where she could see us. We had to fight to be allowed to go by ourselves to Jefferson Park, which was around the corner and two blocks away from our apartment. So here we are in this park we fought so hard to get to. Suspended and waiting for someone to make a move that unlocks us so that we can run back home.

+ + +

At this moment, Felix goes from being a cool kid who sat at the back of the school bus, smelling like cigarettes and talking loudly about getting blowjobs from our older sisters (even to kids without

older sisters), to a key reference point in my psychological landscape.

There he is in my dreams, serving ice cream at Ebetts Field where I take my future wife on our honeymoon. In other dreams: fleeing with the rest of us from flying zombies. Sometimes, he works the door to my daydreams, checking my ID and making me pay a cover charge before I slip into a memory that I've lived and imagined and wrote a million times before.

In reality, Felix is average size for his age. Being a few years older than me makes him only a few inches taller. I'm probably reducing him in stature to purge him from my psyche for good. I'm remembering this and writing it down for the same reason.

But all of this is all an exercise in futility. Now as always.

+ + +

And yeah, a small part of this is about racism.

This is the focus that my past professors and peer reviewers are most encouraging about. First, though, they tell me to emphasize how poor we all were, as if all racial minorities need to be poor, too. They ask me to put rips and tears in our clothing and lice in our hair. They want some of us to have Kool-Aid mustaches. I refuse to put

one on Evie, though. I'm very protective of my sister, even in my writing. But protecting her just means changing her name. She always liked the name Evie, though probably not anymore.

Some reviewers have wanted everyone in the story except Felix to be white. This includes me and Evie – Pacific Islanders who are part Seneca Indian and part Japanese. This also includes Derrick, who in the words of one kid we go to school with, is “midnight black.”

I'm told to play up the moment when Mitch calls Felix the n-word, but I like to play up the possibility that he didn't.

Or that he called him the n-word without the hard r because that makes a difference.

Or that he was joking. Because that also makes a difference.

I'm told to focus on the big conflict, but instead, I'm interested in the gaps and thresholds of speech.

+ + +

Back on that Tuesday afternoon, Felix lowers his shirt, concealing the gun and punches Mitch in the face. He taunts Mitch, who is so dazed that even we can see how bad a shape he's in from across the park. We all watch Mitch as he runs away – Felix and their friends

pointing and laughing.

There's something to this.

But it depends on how I end it. In the first ending I write, Felix walks by us afterward, triumphant. One of his friends is worried that we might call the cops or tell our parents about the gun. But Felix shrugs us off and calls us "stupid little n****s" and moves along.

In Ending #2, he and I meet eyes. "I've been watching you," he says. I don't say anything, just stare back, until he invites me to join his group. This ends the narrative where I'm looking not to be treated like such a kid, anymore. It also makes sense because we're all minorities, all of us, we are.

No amount of writing can ever un-write that.

What I'll say happens in real life is this: the teenagers leave when a parent steps in and tells them to stop. In a day or two, whenever we see them at the park again, they act as if nothing happened. Felix and Mitch are all buddy-buddy. They blast their music and throw rocks at us if we get too close to their spot on the basketball court. We continue our games, a bit more mindful of the teenagers until some of us become them.

SPAM

We say it's our favorite because it's the only thing my older sister Andrea knows how to cook. Telling the truth wouldn't hurt Andrea, who seems to resent having to look after us. The truth would only hurt mom. Every night, we wait for her to get home from nursing school. Dinner is the only time we're together: mom, Andrea, me, and Evie.

Earlier today, I told some kids at school about how hard my mom is working to become a nurse. I'm so proud of her. It takes guts to redirect your life in your late thirties with three kids like she's doing. Tyler in my Social Studies class says all nurses are stupid and can't take orders. His dad is a doctor and tells him this, he says, adding, "Why are all nurses brown? Why can't brown people become doctors? Is it because you're not smart enough?"

I wanted to ask him why he thought he could say what he wants. That's not true – I actually wanted to hit him. But his parents had a

backyard and a pool and he had a birthday party coming up that I wanted to be invited to.

When mom gets home that night and we sit at the table, I don't tell her about Tyler because I need to learn how to take care of myself. That's what she tells me a lot these days, especially since my dad moved in with his girlfriend across town and I'm the man of the house.

Mom swears to us that this is temporary. Because she needs us to, we nod our heads and believe her. This is how we say grace: not to God but to each other.

Our rumbling stomachs keep us awake despite how tired we are. My kid sister Evie says, "Hey, mom!" and farts as loud as she can. I belch even louder to one-up her. We laugh and cry and laugh again.

We never ask for seconds, though, because we know better.

LILY FROM BUILDING F

She taps her foot against the sidewalk. I watch as her corduroys slide off her hips, but I look away and pretend I wasn't when she catches me.

"Did I tell you I saw Kurt Cobain's ghost?" she asks. "Right in front of our building. Mitch and I were smoking behind the dumpster, and he was, like... right there."

I forgot she smoked now. She didn't used to before this year, before she dyed her hair black and started wearing JNCOs, before she started to hang out with the older boys in the neighborhood that only noticed her when she got boobs, back when she let this awkward sixth grader sit with her (a seventh grader!) on the bus.

"Right here on Jefferson?"

“No, the other street I live on,” she snaps. She continues in a gentler tone, “Sorry. It’s been one of those days. I’m so bored.”

Laughter erupts from the darkness blanketing the park. We turn toward the commotion but see nothing. Lily stares long after I stop.

Mitch is out there watching her. The outbursts of hollering and laughter are his way of letting her know that he’s with her – with us – watching where her mom can’t see him.

I might think it was romantic if I didn’t hate him so much.

+ + +

A premonition, she said.

It wasn’t just the ghost of Kurt Cobain that she and Mitch saw that night but his premonition. I love the word instantly.

The laughter from the park dies down, so I don’t have to compete for Lily’s attention, anymore. The premonition of the moment when I had to is all that remains.

Lily’s mom only let her come outside with me. She remembered me from before Lily “started acting out.”

“You’re such a nice boy,” she’d said once.

What was it about me that was so nice?

Was it what kept Lily from ever inviting me over?

+ + +

The next firecracker dies before it illuminates anything.

“This is so boring,” she says. “This summer is taking forever, you know.”

I don’t get why that’s a bad thing.

“You’ll have lots to do when school starts,” I tease. She’s starting high school in September. “Soon, you’ll be leaving for college. Then you can do whatever you want.”

I don’t know why I brought up the prospect of college. She was a B- to C student, she’d told me. I guess I want to believe that college is in her future because I already know it’s in mine.

“I still have your Smashing Pumpkins tapes. Sorry I keep forgetting to give them back.”

"Don't worry about it," she says.

"My favorite song is 'Soothe,'" I reply as if she asked. I'm hoping to prove that I not only heard what she heard but felt what she felt.

+ + +

She still hasn't told me why she's grounded. I've only heard stuff from kids who'd heard stuff from other kids. The story that Lily and Mitch were having sex in her apartment is the most widely circulated. I can't believe it, even if enough people are saying it to make it true.

I ask because I have to know.

"Not that it's anyone's business," she answers, "but we were only kissing. God, I wish people would just shut up if they don't know what they're talking about."

I'm desperate to change the subject. "So what'd you do today?"

"There was a *Real World* marathon on," she said. "So that."

"That guy on the show is disgusting," I say about Puck. I'm not referring to the episode when he picked his nose and then used that same finger to scoop out peanut butter. I'm referring to how

he speaks to people like they're beneath them, as if they should be grateful he's acknowledging them in the first place.

This summer, there appear to be only two types of people in the world: people like Puck, like Mitch, that take these types of liberties with people and all the rest of us who let them.

+ + +

A second firecracker arcs across the sky. I mistake it for a falling star for a second before realizing that kind of thing doesn't really happen.

"They should stop," I remark.

"You don't like it? I think they're cool."

"No, I like them. I just think that someone might call the cops if they keep setting them off, is all."

"If there's anything worse than parents, it's cops," she says, "What do you think of me when I say that?"

I shrug. "I see why you would."

"I'm messing with you, Chris. God."

I take a breath and hold it until my chest hurts.

"I like you, Lily," I say when I breathe again.

I know what she's going to say without having to wait for it. For both of our sakes, she looks away. "Chris..."

I then look away, too. For my sake alone.

"I can't," she says. "Mitch and me —"

I want to take it back, all of it. She takes one step toward me. Then another.

+ + +

She remains a few feet away from me because Mitch could be watching.

"You all right?" she asks.

I nod. I'm not going to cry if that's her question.

"You have to understand," she says, "Mitch and me have known each other since we were little. You're a cool kid, though, Chris."

I bite my tongue to keep from crying. I nod my head. Harder than is necessary.

She waits for me to say something. What, I don't know. She's wounded me and knows it. I'm trying to hide it and failing.

"I'm going back inside," she says. "Call me. We'll talk."

I watch her until she's gone. Something flutters in the darkness between us, and I wait for the ghost of Kurt Cobain - or whatever it was they saw that night together - alone.

MRS. WOLBURTON

Mrs. Wolburton rents the townhouse attached to ours. She used to be married to our landlord. I overheard Mom say she gets to live here for free as part of their divorce settlement, which might actually be true. I don't know.

With the exception of my sister, Evie, she never has visitors.

They pass the time with puzzles until Mom gets home. I hear them giggling. Through the ventilator, I smell brownies and cupcakes. I'm told I could join them, but I'm too old to hang out with them. I'm in high school now.

+ + +

I don't really have friends. Just Derrick, who I only see on the bus. He goes to the county vocational school after first period, and I go to a few AP classes where I'm ignored.

I've taught myself to embrace my role as 'loner.' It's difficult because who wants to be alone all the time?

I'm happy that high school ends in three-and-a-half years.

I wonder what thoughts Mrs. Wolburton had in high school. Back before she was Mrs. Wolburton.

I wonder what her maiden name is.

+ + +

I'm listening to a lot of Nine Inch Nails' *Pretty Hate Machine* and Radiohead's *The Bends*. I saw music videos from these albums one night on *120 Minutes*. Even after multiple viewings, I still don't get them. But I want to.

I heard Mom say once that Mrs. Wolburton is in her thirties. That means when she was in high school, she could've been listening to The Stooges or Joy Division, scribbling lyrics by Patti Smith and Leonard Cohen in her notebooks.

These are just names I've seen in magazines or heard mumbled during MTV interviews.

They might mean something to Mrs. Wolburton, though.

I found a Leonard Cohen lyric the other day online. It goes:

Ring the bells that still can ring

Forget your perfect offering

There is a crack in everything

That's how the light gets in.

It reminds me of a nursery rhyme. But I know there's more to it than that.



She catches me on my way in, a big, welcoming smile on her face and a mixing bowl tucked in the wing of her arm. Behind her, Evie is at work on a puzzle.

"Your sister and I saw you walk up the driveway," she says. "We're making brownies. Ooh! And that puzzle we've been waiting for finally arrived this afternoon!"

I look past her at the puzzle still too fragmented for me to make out.

"So how are you liking high school?" she asks.

I shrug. "It's okay."

"I loved high school so much," she continues. "Didn't really do well in the classroom, but loved going to the dances. So many friends, too, back then."

I try to imagine her with friends but I can't. I wonder how people become the type of adults they become. I wonder what they do if they don't like it.



"Have you seen Samantha lately?" Derrick asks.

Samantha is the college student that lived next door to us before Mrs. Wolburton. Derrick only likes her because he swears he heard her having sex once.

"My landlord's wife lives next door now," I say.

He asks if she's hot, and I just give him a look. "Know anything cool about her?" he asks after.

I have to think about. "She used to like dancing."

Derrick smiles. "Like, a stripper?"

Instead, he continues flipping through the channels for *Showgirls*. There is this pool scene he swears I have to see.

+ + +

We're celebrating that I made the Honor Roll. I was most surprised about my A in English because so much of the grade rested on class participation. It's hard to talk when everyone in the room looks like they want you to shut up.

Mom switched shifts with a co-worker to take me and Evie to Pizza Hut. I'm grateful that she's doing this. She doesn't have to, and she probably shouldn't. Mom doesn't tell us about our finances. All I know is we get free lunch at school.

On the ride home, Mom and Evie belt out Wilson Phillips songs. I contain my laughter in the back seat, but when it gets the best of me, they're quick to join in.

We see smoke before we see any traces of a fire. We see Mrs. Wolburton standing alone in the driveway.

+ + +

There's this look on her face: it looks like a smile but only from far away. The fire stays contained towards the back of her home, where it might go unnoticed if you drive by fast enough.

Mom looks at Mrs. Wolburton, who only apologizes, "I wasn't really thinking, you know? It was an accident. I don't think your guys' half will catch fire... I hope not, Lucy... Believe me, I really..."

She smothers her sobs at first, then releases them one by one.

Mom's expression goes from shocked to horrified to sorry. She reaches out to Mrs. Wolburton and embraces her. She holds her close. If you drive by us, you'd think we were family.

+ + +

We stay the night with Mrs. Moynihan, mom's best friend. The two of them are at the kitchen table sipping coffee. They look like they could be talking about anything, as if the whole incident with Mrs. Wolburton already makes perfect sense and needs no further discussing.

"It's just for the night," Mom says to me and Evie when she tucks

us in. "We'll continue our celebration next time I'm off, okay?"

"When will that be?" asks Evie.

Mrs. Moynihan comes in with blankets. I don't anticipate that cold of a night, but I thank her.

"What's your maiden name, Mrs. Moynihan?" I ask.

"Why?"

I shrug. "Just wondering, I guess."

I want to explain to her that I never knew Mrs. Wolburton's, because maybe then she'd understand. And she could help me understand, too.

+ + +

I think about it sometimes.

I talk about it with Derrick, even though he is far from helpful.

Yesterday, I was over at his place while he was skimming through his brother's VHS collection: another scene from another movie that he

swore wouldn't disappoint.

"Forget about it, already," he told me. His eyes widened -- I thought in regards to Mrs. Wolburton -- before he waved his catch above his head and smiled.

"I got it!"

THE ROCK SAYS

We mourned The Rock when white people started to cheer him. They could buy The Rock's merchandise carefree. They wore his t-shirts in the front row. Their voices, while as loud as ours, could actually be heard because they were so much closer.

We loved The Rock first, though: us misfit kids at school, us poor kids, the brown or black and the ugliest-of-all kids. When he debuted, he smiled the way we wished we could: a bright-white and unapologetic smile. We memorized it so we could substitute it for our own one day. Our teeth were either covered in braces or, even worse, still as crooked as they were when they came in and as crooked as they'd always be.

We loved him when he turned against the crowd that had booed him for months for daring to be so successful so young, while not looking like any of them. The Rock: Pacific Islander, black, and part Native American. In his smiling face that originally begged them to

smile back, we saw our own. In the crowd's cruel rejection of him ("Die, Rocky! Die!"), the reality of our lives. In how he fought back and overcame them all, one by one then all at once, we saw our dreams made real.

We loved his catchphrases. By referring to himself in the third person ("The Rock says"), he celebrated himself in a way that we felt we never deserved before. By telling his opponents to "know your role and shut your mouth" and that it "doesn't matter what you think," he took what was often said to us and gave it back.

We really wished we could buy his merchandise. But our parents had already paid so much for the tickets, our moms had taken the day off from work to bring us, and we had already gotten our one drink and snack. A t-shirt seemed greedy.

We had our voices to cheer him, anyway: "Rocky! Rocky! Rocky!" We wondered if he could even hear us, so few in number and all the way up in the nosebleeds.

So when did the white kids start wearing his shirt? When did we find ourselves surrounded by them, still without shirts of our own? It happened slow and steady, we think. Or maybe it happened all at once. Not long ago, they'd been cheering for Degeneration-X, a group of white guys that mocked The Rock with blackface and then

gestured to their crotch if we dared be uppity about it. We just know that when everyone started to say The Rock's catchphrases alongside us (but not alongside us), he was a little less ours. And we realized that he would never be ours in the same way again.

BOXED WINE THAT NEVER EMPTIES

The first time I drink is at sixteen with my Seneca grandmother. Not because all Indians are drunks, but because we are grieving. It's been this way since last week when my papa's heart attacked the rest of him. We tell stories now to bring him back to life in a way the medics and doctors couldn't.

In one story, Papa is the Desi Arnaz of upstate New York. Grandma talks about how all the women used to tremble and swoon in his presence. "And out of them all," she says, "*out of all of them, Chris, he chose me.*"

My stomach filled with wine, my muscles and bones so lax, I imagine angry, white fathers and brothers who felt that this gentleman from "the islands" had defiled their virgin daughters/sisters. Papa becomes a video game character, beating up one big white guy before moving on to another, who is taller and fatter than the

the previous. But more likely, these fathers and brothers were grateful that Papa started dating Grandma, a Seneca Indian. Brown belongs with brown, they'd think. Then as now as always. I can't help but hate that they got what they wanted.

In some of Grandma's other stories, Papa is a young boy in Guam, taking care of his family after they're separated during the Japanese occupation of World War II. In the dead of night, he sprints through the jungles, from one camp to another, relaying messages and carrying food and making sure that everyone knows that everyone else is well. To his family, he is everything: messenger, provider, bringer of hope.

"Just as you kids now are to us," Grandma says in my favorite ending.

But he never came across a Japanese soldier? I want to ask.

Maybe a soldier out for a piss catches sight of Papa and holds him at gunpoint. Something for a second distracts him, though – the crashing waves, maybe a snapped twig – and Papa lunges at his throat. When word of Papa's act spreads, he inspires a small rebellion. No one figures out his identity, though. And Papa never owns up to the act, realizing the importance of silence that he teaches to all his grandkids to varying degrees of success.

In other stories Grandma tells, Papa is a hard-working father of four, a grandfather to nine, and a respected fireman and seasonal farmer. I don't imagine anything dramatic about these stories because I was alive for most of them.

Soon, I share my own stories, even though Grandma doesn't need to hear them because she was there and remembers them better. She listens, though. Smiles when she knows I want her to. She seems happy to hear my memories of him, of all of us.

I see Papa at the dinner table, smoking a cigarette and watching us all run around his house every year at Christmas. I see him on the bench at the State Fair, jokingly hogging the fried bread, while Grandma keeps trying to bring our attention to the Indian dancers.

"I could have spent more time with him," I say.

"He understood," she says. "He was proud of the type of young man you're becoming."

"Maybe I'll write a story about him one day," I say.

Grandma smiles and leans in, visibly excited by this idea. "Make sure you mention that he looked like Desi Arnaz."

Every day brings us further away from him, the man who helped take care of my mom and the rest of us when she was between jobs and we had no money. We tell our stories to keep him close. We got to tell them constantly. To ourselves, to each other, to the boxed White Zinfandel that never empties. The wine feels cool on our lips, and our bodies feel light and relaxed with fewer stories in them.

ADOLESCENCE, SECONDHAND

We'd been talking for seventeen minutes straight, a semester's best for me. She liked my shirt, she'd said, because it reminded her of something one of her best friends back home would wear. The shirt was nothing special – just a short-sleeve buttoned-down with front pockets that didn't open – so I took this as proof that she liked me.

We shared our reasons for moving to New York City to go to school. From Iowa, she always saw herself living in Manhattan. She was a writer and actress and wanted to direct movies, which I was sure would work out for her. I just wanted to live somewhere where being brown wasn't such an anomaly.

“So are you, like, Hawaiian?” she asked.

“Yeah,” I said – if only because it was easier.

Her eyes suddenly glowed. With anticipation, maybe. Or as my sisters would say, “entitlement.” They were always making fun of me for thinking only with my *kungkung*. But they were just jealous.

“Because mom loves you more,” they’d tease.

Maybe true – mom told me how much she talked about her “baby boy down in the city” to her co-workers. Mom, who held down two jobs while working towards her nursing degree. I felt terrible when I thought about how her sacrifices sometimes culminated in nights like this, with me trying and failing to get laid.

This girl was still so ecstatic that she was right about me being Hawaiian. “I can’t believe I got it! I had a feeling, just looking at you. My family went to Hawaii a couple of times when I was growing up and you look like those guys at the airport with the leis.”

She touched my arm and added, “The hotter guys, of course.”

I thought about responding with the class presentation in seventh grade when everyone got to choose a state to report on but me. “You should present on Hawaii!” my teacher Mrs. Flowers told me, “Won’t that be lovely for you?” Or I could tell her about my mom’s wish to take us all to Guam, where our family actually was from.

“So what do people usually guess your race is?” she asked.

I’d heard it all through the years: Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, “some kind of Mexican,” “South American,” or “Eskimo.” That does not even include the slurs hurled at me, which beat the rocks, golf balls, and spit I’d gotten other times.

“People always argue with me whenever I tell them what I am,” I said, “as if they know better.”

“Do you eat SPAM, like, all the time?” she asked. “One of my friends is Korean, and she eats it every night.”

I laughed because she laughed, but I wondered how her friend handled comments like this. Would the friend forgive the racism of the question if it was kind of true?

“So what do you think I am?” she asked.

It was rare that a white person asked me this. Typically, if they were anything, it was Native American, and they were all too quick to tell me about their “great-great-great-grandmother who was a Cherokee princess.”

If such was the case with this girl, I could tell her about my own

Native American ancestor: not a Cherokee but a Seneca; not a princess but a drunk.

But telling her that I was not only not-Hawaiian but also part Indian seemed too much. I hated when conversations felt like filling out a census form. So instead I pretended to examine her from head to toe.

"I'm guessing you're white," I said.

"You have to be more specific," she said. "I didn't just say you were Asian."

"Northern European."

"More specific."

"Isn't it all the same?" I asked. Since her Korean friend and I were apparently so interchangeable, what difference could there be between a Czech girl and whatever this girl was?

She made a face – neither good nor bad, but definitely not good. I quickly smiled to let her know I was joking. My dad always told me to smile quickly whenever a joke of mine fell flat.

"Especially to white people," he said. "They'll think you're stupid. But so what? You'll know better."

The girl looked off into the distance but then back at me with even greater interest. "Well, since I guessed right and you didn't, you should definitely give me a prize," she said. "At least, get me a beer."

I shook my head. I was broke, but I wasn't going to tell her that. Because then I'd have to tell her about getting fired when a guy at the convenience store where I worked called me 'Chink eyes' and I told him to get fucked. "I'm not really Hawaiian," I said. "My family is from Guam. Sorry, you were wrong."

"Yeah, but was I?" She smiled at me with just her eyes.

I imagined her growing up on some idyllic cul-de-sac where fathers swapped high school football stories and first-born sons had names like Brendan or Leland or Connor and everyone was beautiful. I imagined her having the type of adolescence I saw in movies. Or heard about in my high school classmates' conversations. The adolescence I always wanted for myself, even if only secondhand.

I was raised on hand-me-downs: school supplies, school clothes, every car we ever owned. I learned young that hand-me-downs beat having nothing at all. I silenced the sound of my sisters' voices in

my head, chastising me for only going for white girls. I told myself that my parents were proud of me, that I would write our story tomorrow.

“So,” she teased.

“I can’t argue with you,” I replied. And then told her the words she probably heard her entire life, “You win.”

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